

Written by Ronald Challis

1939 was a somewhat exciting/expectant time, as children we were aware of a possible war, there were many signs all around. Barrage balloons being inflated and floated in the air as an exercise, the testing of the Air Raid sirens, air raid shelters being dug, canisters of tear gas being let off, gas masks being issued.

After the war started the gas masks were for a time carried by all, but this practice was before long stopped. In addition to all this there were the plans being made for the evacuation of schoolchildren to the safe country areas. The school I was attending in 1939 was the Brockley Central School. The top schools were Grammar Schools, followed by Central Schools and then Senior Schools.

I remember going with my mother to Brockley Cross Station where the rest of the school were gathered. I had a small case with me. My mother left me there to go off to work (she was the cook in a nursery school). From Brockley Cross we travelled by train to Caterham and from there by coach to Lingfield. This was the very first time I had left home, I remember feeling lonely and I had a lump in my throat. Soon these feelings went away as nights were to be seen. I had never heard of Caterham or Lingfield, they could have been in a foreign land.

From Lingfield, in ones and twos, we were allocated to various families, I think this was mainly organised by the WVS. When I think back I wonder at the generosity of the local people, taking in strangers, they took a chance the children were house trained.

With another boy (Stan B) we were taken to a farm in Felcourt (just a mile or so from Lingfield). We were in deed lucky, our hosts Mr and Mrs Simmons were lovely people and the farm of about 30 acres was a rented property. The farmhouse indeed was quite small, as you entered the front door you were immediately in the downstairs room, where meals were taken and where the family sat of an evening, the Simmons were very patriotic. If ever the National Anthem was played on the radio we had to be quiet and stay still. The farmhouse was really overcrowded – apart from Mr and Mrs Simmons there was one son, Joe, and three daughters, Eva, Pam, Emmie, and of course us two evacuees. It was indeed crowded. Stan and I were in a small bedroom just sufficient for one bed which filled most of the room, we slept head to toe.

Stan came from a very religious and old fashioned family. In winter he had to wear woollen underclothes which were a bit of a problem – when washed they tended to shrink. I can see him now standing on the bed struggling to pull on his long johns – not a pretty sight. If he had a cold he had a piece of red flannel which he soaked in vinegar and then put it on his chest. Stan was no saint, up to the usual boy's tricks. I met him once after the war, he was in Deptford Broadway standing on a soap box and preaching, he pretended he did not know me. Some time ago I learned he was now dead and for most of his adult life was in and out of hospital – he had some mental problem.

Emmie Simmons was due to be married in September and because of the impending war the wedding was brought forward. What to do with two evacuees? The answer was to take them along for the church and later celebrations. We were even included in the family photograph. With Emmie getting married it solved part of the overcrowding as Frank, her husband, had been able to rent a cottage just a short walk from the farm. When they returned from their honeymoon it was arranged for Stan and myself to be billeted with them to ease the overcrowding, we still had the run of the farm and often went out to catch rabbits with Joe. When it came to Christmas we joined the rest of the family for Christmas dinner. Further proof of the great generosity of the Simmons family – we were treated as part of them and met all the in-laws and their children.

The early part of the war, things were quiet, apart from the odd false alarms. Things changed quite quickly after Dunkirk, I remember cycling as far as Crowhurst, where I sat on the railway bank and watched the trains go by with the soldiers who had been brought back to England from France. Some of the soldiers had bandages on, but for the most part they were cheerful, relieved to be back and may have waved from the trains.

After Dunkirk, things did change and the daylight bombing raid started on the big cities, and, in our case, the target was London. From being a safe area things changed a little although we were not in any great danger. Many of the German planes flew over on their way to London. For us, we had a grandstand view of things, we witnessed many a dog fight, saw planes badly shot up and crashing, also a number of airmen parachuting to earth, escaping from their damaged craft, or the fighter planes chasing them. There was one RAF fighter plane crash landed in one of the farm's fields – we raced to see it but the military were there first, I think in this instance the pilot was not injured.

With the heavy losses suffered by both Germany and our own aircraft the daylight raids stopped for the most part and the night bombing started. Again, where we lived seemed to be under some of the plane's flight paths, we could clearly hear the planes and identify them as German because they had a particular throbbing sound. One evening after our meal we were playing Monopoly when we heard a very loud bang and assumed someone quite a distance away had suffered. We were surprised and alarmed when, on the following morning, we found the bomb had landed in a neighbour's garden and fortunately for all of us, it had failed to explode. We were evacuated away from danger whilst the Army dealt with the threat – it took some days to dig up the bomb.

On another night a German plane jettisoned a large number of incendiary bombs which landed on a wooded and gorse area, setting it alight. All the neighbours left their houses with old sacks, brushes, blankets etc turned out to beat out the fires. It took some time and I suppose the large area of flames would have been visible to the planes flying overhead, but putting out the flames was urgent and I don't think many thought about the possible danger. I think a number of planes did not meet their intended target and the plane crews were relieved to be able to get rid of their bombs and go back to base. A

sequel to the fire was the fact that afterwards there were many unexploded incendiary bombs possibly having landed on soft ground – we found two three and kept them as souvenirs for a time until we handed them in. When we returned back to our various homes we were all blackened with soot.

When we knew a German plane had been brought down and we were aware of where it had crash landed, quite a few of the boys with bicycles would race to the site as it was possible to obtain bits and pieces to take away before the planes were taken away. Perspex was the favourite thing to get as it could be fashioned into rings.

Schools and schooling was a problem, at first Brockley Central hired the local Lingfield School, a half day each – this obviously was not satisfactory and it was reorganised, making better use of all the room available and a local hall. From then on it was full days. Again, everything changed when a very large house was rented in Dormansland, the house was adequate for the number of classrooms required and it also served for boys to be boarders, just like a Public School. All the meals were provided and the laundry was done. One of the many difficulties was the fact that the younger schoolmasters were being called to serve in the forces. Their places were taken mainly by teachers being brought back from retirement. It was inevitable that some subjects were never studied – as teachers left their specialities were not always covered.

There was one quite amusing happening, a troop of soldiers from the Irish Guards were marching through the High Street when none of those recently called up was spotted amongst the marchers. What a golden opportunity for us – boys were walking alongside the soldiers and cheering and making other apt comments. The unfortunate victim had soon learned the Army language and we were told where to go!

At no time did we go hungry, on the farm we always had fresh milk and vegetables preserved in isinglass. Cheese and meat were more scarce. As for sweets these had all disappeared but it was possible to buy chough sweets in the chemist as a substitute. You could also buy some sort of salts – when added to water they fizzed up. The drawback to these was the fact that they were indeed a sort of laxative.

We eventually had to leave Emmie and Frank as they were expecting their first child. After living with a few different hosts I went and stayed at Ranworth and I was there until I left school in 1944. I returned to London where the buzz bombs and V2s were dropping. I spent a year working in the Bank and I was called up on my 18th birthday, serving as a Sapper in Royal Engineers for the next three years. This meant that from 1939 to 1948 I was living at home for just one year.

The old scholars from Brockley Central meet twice a year, April and October. In April we meet at the old Rivoli Cinema in Crofton Park and in October the Hall in Lingfield. The numbers are gradually falling due to old age but the Lingfield one does have some locals joining us. Many of these are relatives of the original hosts. I usually take the daughter born to Emmie and Frank. I still have contact after all these years.